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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CARACAS 000148

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SUBJECT: CHAVEZ CONFRONTS CATHOLIC CHURCH; EPISCOPAL
CONFERENCE STANDING FIRM

REF: A. CARACAS 000053

[1](#)B. CARACAS 000052

[1](#)C. CARACAS 000062

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES,
REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Venezuelan Catholic Church leaders have become increasingly vocal defenders of democratic freedoms since President Chavez' re-election on December 3, 2006. In recent statements to the media and via formal Episcopal Conference communiques, they have repeatedly expressed concerns about the direction of President Chavez' "socialist" plan of government and his decision to close an independent broadcaster. The Catholic bishops appear determined to continue speaking out, despite vociferous public attacks on them by Chavez and government intimidation. The Venezuelan Catholic Church enjoys some state subsidies, but has learned to survive on diminishing government support. Chavez may be taking on the Catholic Church so strongly because it is one of the few remaining independent and credible institutions that can challenge his radical ambitions, including in neighborhoods where Chavez derives his principal support. End Summary.

Catholic Clergy Speaking Out

[1](#)2. (U) Since President Chavez was re-elected on December 3, 2006, the bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Venezuela have issued a number of public statements registering concern about Chavez' plans to institute "Socialism in the 21st Century." Merida Archbishop Baltazar Enrique Porras Cardozo issued a December 5 communique to all Venezuelan priests critical of the "seduction of populism." In the six-page document, Archbishop Porras suggested that the government may be merely placating the poor with "the oil gravy train, social programs, pressure, official intimidation, and the unequal application of rules and distribution of resources."

[1](#)3. (U) The four senior leaders of the Episcopal Conference subsequently sent President Chavez a December 14 letter in which they urged Chavez to govern with "respect for minorities" and to promote "harmony, dialogue, and understanding" among Venezuelans. The bishops also expressed concerns about draft Education, Religion, and International Cooperation laws being considered by the 100 percent

pro-Chavez National Assembly. They asked him to consider granting amnesty to political prisoners and recommended that Chavez' eschew "marxist ideology and statism, the results of which have been negative in the countries where they have been applied."

14. (U) The bishops issued both opening and closing communiqus for the January 7-13 Episcopal Conference highlighting their concerns. Episcopal Conference President and Maracaibo Archbishop Ubaldo Santana Sequera's January 7 opening statement underscored the Church's defense of "a plural, respectful, harmonious, and participatory democracy that resolves the big problems of the most impoverished sectors and denies benefits to no one." He specifically exhorted the Chavez government to reconsider the decision to close the independent broadcaster RCTV, and numerous bishops echoed his comments in pointed remarks to the media (Ref A). Archbishop Santana also lamented that "Venezuela is bleeding on all sides from violence, insecurity, organized crime, hired assassins, and irregular armed groups that operate on the border (with Colombia)."

Chavez Lashing Out

15. (U) At the January 8 televised swearing-in ceremony for his new cabinet, Chavez reacted sharply to Church criticism of his RCTV decision. He urged Cardinal Urosa Savino to stay out of politics ("the shoemaker should mind shoes") and citing Marx, warned the Church against becoming an "opiate of the people" (Ref B). Chavez continued his harsh public criticism of Church leaders during his January 10 inauguration speech (Ref C). Pointing to Cardinal Urosa, Chavez said the Catholic church leadership represents the vestiges of the "hidden dictatorship" of previous governments. He urged Church leaders to study Marx and Lenin

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in order to better minister to their flock. "The state respects the Church," bellowed Chavez to a standing ovation inside the National Assembly, "but the Church must respect the state." He added his judgment that Episcopal Conference VP and Coro Bishop Roberto Luckert is going to "hell."

Church Standing Firm

16. (SBU) Undeterred by Chavez' rhetorical attacks on the Church and personal insults of senior bishops, the Episcopal Conference, in the name of the entire Catholic clergy in Venezuela, issued a tough January 13 communique. The communique notes that since independence, the Venezuela people have chosen "liberty and the division, autonomy, and the succession of state powers." The document exhorts the BRV to respect "political pluralism" as it pursues constitutional and legislative changes. Noting that there are some situations in which the bishops "cannot be silent," the bishops pledged to continue commenting on issues that affect human rights, education, freedom of expression, ideological exclusion, unemployment, and the judicial system, among other social issues.

17. (C) Barcelona Bishop Cesar Ramon Ortega told PolCouns January 12 that Venezuelan bishops will continue to speak out in defense of democratic principles, even if the message is a "bitter one" for the BRV. Reflecting on the recent visit of a seminary classmate from Cuba, Bishop Ramon Ortega said the Cuban people have been "martyred" by Castro, and said the Church does not want the Venezuelan people to be similarly treated. Responding in the media to Chavez' insult, Bishop Luckert told the media that he hopes President Chavez brings checkers with him so the two could "play together in Hell." He also expressed concern that Chavez' personal attacks on senior clergymen would incite Chavista violence against them.

¶ 8. (C) Episcopal Conference Secretary General and Puerto Cabello Bishop Ramon Jose Viloria told poloff January 16 that the Catholic Church is not seeking confrontation with Chavez, but also said the Church leaders would continue to speak out in defense of democratic values. He expressed concern that the BRV would engage in the "hidden violence" of intimidation against Church activists, adding that he suspects the BRV was involved in the unsolved April 22, 2006 murder of Father Jorge Pinango Mascareno. He accused Chavez of engaging in a deliberate strategy of trying to foster divisions among church leaders (Chavez frequently cites San Cristobal Marco Tulio Ramirez as an example of a "good bishop") as well as create a gulf between bishops and their congregations.

¶ 9. (C) Bishop Viloria said he does not perceive any new cabinet members disposed to real dialogue. He noted that new Interior and Justice Minister Pedro Carreno delivered a tough, private address to the Episcopal Conference after Chavez' speeches. Viloria said Carreno warned the bishops that they are out of touch with their flocks because a majority of Venezuelan Catholics voted for Chavez. Carreno also accused the Church of failing to impart ethical values and thus being responsible for the rise of crime in Venezuela. Searching for something positive to say, Viloria noted that Carreno did ensure speedy resolution of a Church complaint regarding a government body that claimed to have may a payment to the Church, but had not.

State Subsidies Shrinking

¶ 10. (C) Viloria also noted that the Catholic Church is increasingly less dependent on government subsidies. Direct subsidies have not been increased since they were set by an agreement with the Vatican in the 1960's, and the BRV has reportedly reduced these payments. Viloria said that Puerto Cabello received less than \$3000 in 2006. The Catholic Church does receive state subsidies for Catholic schools, which Viloria said "provide a better education at less expense" than government-run schools. He also acknowledged that the BRV may seek greater control over Catholic schools under the guise of education reform. In addition, Viloria expressed concern that the BRV's proposed Law of International Cooperation could effectively eliminate international support for Venezuelan Catholic Church institutions and programs. The Catholic Church does receive

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considerable support from international sources, including the American Conference of Bishops and other American Catholic partners.

Comment

¶ 11. (C) President Chavez is probably confronting the Catholic Church so strongly because it is one of the few remaining institutions in Venezuela that can and will publicly challenge Chavez' "socialist" plans. A substantial majority of Venezuelans are at least nominally Catholic, and the Catholic Church continues to enjoy substantial credibility among Venezuelans, according to local polling. More than two million persons reportedly turned out for the January 14 Barquisimeto procession of a historic Spanish statue of the Virgin Mary (even Venezuelan state TV covered the procession live). Moreover, the Catholic clergy, unlike most of the political opposition, have deep roots and residual influence in poor neighborhoods where Chavez relies on substantial political support.

¶ 12. (C) While the public exchanges between Chavez and the Church have subsided, continued state-Church tensions are likely to fester as Chavez continues to concentrate authority

into his hands and undermine democratic institutions and freedoms. At the same time, Church leaders, noting that they must be mindful of the "survival of the Church," are not predisposed to lead any popular resistance to Chavez' government plans. Despite their determination to speak out, Church leaders have not yet publicly commented, for example, on the pending Enabling Law that will give Chavez broad authorities to issue executive decrees with the force of law.

We anticipate Church leaders will become especially vocal whenever the BRV rolls out its plans for an ideologically-loaded reform of Venezuela's education system.

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